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ABSTRACT

Suggesting there are ways to make reading and writing more attractive to middle school students, this booklet offers strategies for parents to use to help their students keep reading. Sections of the booklet are: "Why Should I Encourage My Middle School Student To Read for Fun?"; "'You Don't Care What I Like': Listening, Talking, and Sharing"; "'I Have No Time!': Helping Your Child Prioritize"; "'There's Nothing Good To Read': Helping Your Child Find Materials"; and "'Maybe Reading Isn't So Bad.'" (Contains lists of 13 books for children ages 10 to 14, 4 popular book series for children ages 10 to 14, 3 magazines for children ages 10 to 14, 4 Internet resources for children, 11 resources for parents, and 7 parent publications published by the International Reading Association.) (RS)

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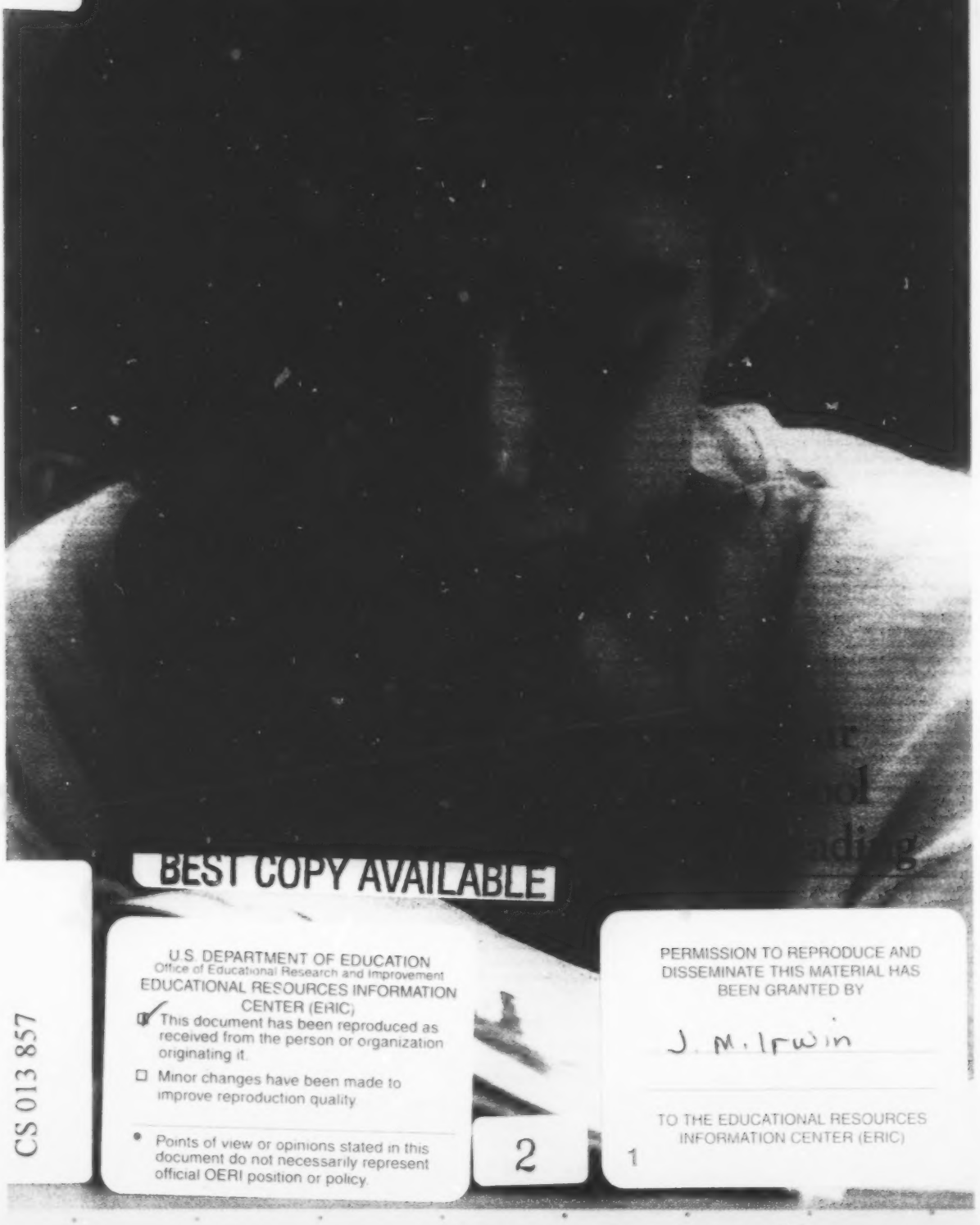
"Books Are Cool!"



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"Books Are Cool!" Keeping Your Middle School Student Reading

Early adolescence is a challenging time for both you and your child. Your 10- through 14-year-old is struggling to become more independent, is adjusting to physical and emotional changes, and is trying to determine her own set of moral priorities. It may seem difficult simply to talk to your child, let alone encourage her to do something as "uncool" as reading for fun.

There are ways, however, to make reading and writing more attractive to your middle school student. You will find that these activities will give you something to discuss and share with your child at an age when she is not always willing to discuss her life openly. Reading also will provide your child with emotional outlets during times when she is coping with peer pressure and moodiness.

Why Should I Encourage My Middle School Student to Read for Fun?

Parents often hear that students need to read outside of school, but you may not be sure exactly why this kind of reading is so necessary. You also may not know how important a role you play in encouraging your adolescent's reading. Setting an example and creating a reading-friendly environment are key elements in establishing lifelong reading habits. Reading well also contributes to a child's current and future academic success.

Practice Matters

How do people become good readers? Many parents think that children learn to read in school, where they master skills taught by teachers, and that their children do whatever reading and writing is necessary during school hours.

However, middle school students who are good readers read often outside of school. They read well not just because they have been taught well and have completed their assignments, but also because they read often, on their own, and for pleasure. Students who read for pleasure are comfortable using language to express their ideas and are more fluent writers.

Read at Home—Read and Write Better at School

Many children become concerned with grades in middle school. Often they start receiving letter marks for the first time, and they may find that their peers have become more competitive. Although academic success is not the only reason a child should read for fun, it is a direct benefit of reading and can be a way for your child to get more enjoyment out of her studies. Reading for pleasure can contribute to academic success in the following ways:

- Students learn to recognize more words on sight. This increases reading rate, fluency, and comprehension.

- Students improve their vocabulary knowledge by figuring out the meanings of unknown words they come across in books. This is a major source of vocabulary growth, particularly for students who read often over many years. Vocabulary knowledge contributes to reading comprehension and is an important part of achievement tests. It also helps your child become a more fluent writer.
- Students increase their knowledge of academic language—a form of language used in school books that differs from the language of everyday conversation. For example, the sentences of books tend to be longer and more complex. Familiarity with this book language improves comprehension, textbook learning, and school writing.

No One Understands Me

Middle school is a difficult time of personal physical and social growth. Children struggle with being popular, and friendships often are not dependable or durable. Reading stories about other children facing similar problems can help your child feel less isolated and less insecure. Reading can give her ideas and strategies for making the adolescent years more enjoyable and productive.

Middle school also is a time when children are developing ideals and a capacity for abstract thought and are deciding on role models. Books and other reading materials can help your child determine how she sees the world around her and how she will make decisions. Writing down ideas helps her understand her own beliefs more clearly.

Parents need to be confident about the necessity of reading and writing outside of school and about their ability to change how much their children read. Middle school students are good at understanding how parents really feel about an issue. Parents who are unsure about the necessity of reading will convey that doubt to their children, who may express the same uncertainty.

"You Don't Care What I Like": Listening, Talking, and Sharing

The first step in encouraging your adolescent to read is to talk to him. Find out what he likes and is most interested in, and validate his choices. Although it may not always seem like it, your child still values your approval and wants to share his thoughts and interests with you. You can encourage reading by asking questions and by indicating clearly that you are pleased that reading is enjoyable and meaningful for him.

Listen Up

Take your child seriously. He may be affected profoundly by something he reads that you may not think is significant (for example, a romance novel or comic book). Be sure to listen to your child's opinions carefully and to ask questions that encourage him to think critically about why he likes the reading material so much.

Listening to your child share reading-related interests and excitement is an indirect form of approval that is very powerful.

Listening to your child share reading-related interests and excitement is an indirect form of approval that is very powerful. Asking questions such as "What do you think the point of the book was?" or "What seemed so realistic about this story to you?" shows that you care about your child's reading and encourages him to think about and articulate opinions.

Talk About It

Discuss with your child what he has read. You may want to read the book, magazine, or other material yourself to facilitate this discussion and model good reading behavior. Reading a book together strengthens parent-child communication and understanding, especially if you

are able to approach any problems your child may be having through discussion of what he is reading.

You do not need to plan discussion time or quiz your child relentlessly about his reading material. Paying attention to his choices, looking at them yourself, and discussing your thoughts about them is a good way to show your child that you consider reading to be an important activity.

"I Have No Time!": Helping Your Child Prioritize

Sixth through ninth grade is a time when children begin to have less leisure time. They have homework to do, club meetings, and sports practice. They also develop more of a social life outside of school. Your child will be struggling for independence from you, for the first time making her own decisions about what to do. It may seem difficult to allow your child some control over her schedule while encouraging her to read at the same time.

However, you can help your child develop good reading habits by encouraging her to decide on a pleasure-reading plan and by treating reading as something you can think about and discuss together. Your child will be more positive if she sees that you are flexible.

Discuss Your Child's Schedule

Explain your feelings. The first thing you should do is sit down with your child to talk about why you think reading is important. Explain that you are talking about fun reading and why reading can be a source of pleasure and learning. Listen carefully to your child's views; if she expresses a lack of interest in reading, acknowledge this feel-

ing, pointing out gently that you want to help her find a way to change her attitude toward reading.

Learn to cooperate. Look at any obstacles such as lack of time, lack of books and materials, little previous experience reading for pleasure, and difficulty with reading. Follow a cooperative approach, using negotiation. If your child says she hasn't ever done much reading on her own, offer to read books with her and go to lunch at her favorite restaurant once a week to discuss your reading. Or offer to extend her bedtime by half an hour if she spends the time reading. You also can agree to help your child establish new routines by turning off the television at the same time each evening or reading aloud after dinner. Demonstrate to your child that you are committed to change.

Finding Time to Read

A good way to determine how your child spends her time is to sit down together and write what happens in a typical week. You also can ask her to keep an activity log. Review the schedule together and try to determine if she's using her time well, or if some activities can be eliminated. Consider which activities are necessary and which are optional.

Obligated time. The amount of time committed to other activities can be a problem, especially during the school year. Like adults, some students have surprisingly full schedules, with long school days, clubs or sports after school, and jobs on the weekends (even 12-year-olds babysit or mow lawns). Fitting in reading can seem difficult, but keep the following ideas in mind:

- Your child may read less during the school year or while her sport is in season, but you can help her establish new routines when these commitments are over. Also, trips and family vacations are ideal times for reading.

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- You can encourage your child to read in the intervals between scheduled activities—as she rides to practice or for 15 minutes before bedtime or homework time.
- You should make sure that your child is not overscheduled. If she never has a free minute, it might be a good idea to eliminate some of the commitments.

Free time. Some students who claim they have no time to read have quite a bit of free time; they just prefer to spend it in other ways, such as playing outside or watching television. Encourage your child to spend some of each day's free time reading. This may not be easy, especially if your child views reading as work and really likes to do other activities. Cooperation and negotiation are important factors in convincing your child to use free time to read.

Looking at the schedule of how your child spends her time during a typical week, discuss the attractiveness of each free-time activity. You might want to put these in order—from those your child likes most to those she likes least (for example, playing new video games might rank higher than playing a game she has had for a long time). Encourage your child to replace the less enjoyable activities with reading. You might start by reducing, rather than eliminating, certain free-time activities and encouraging your child to read for short periods of time every day.

You may want to establish a daily time during which you turn off the television and everyone in the family reads for pleasure.

Honor and guard your child's reading time. Do not allow interruptions. If a chore has not been done, wait until after reading time to mention it. Intercept phone calls and tell friends knocking at the door to come back later. Some children cannot tune out noise or distractions, and some like music while they are reading; together decide what is best and find a comfortable reading spot.

How Do I Handle Television?

Change television habits. This can be difficult, particularly when the whole family watches television often. Most children are not going to want to substitute reading for television, especially if you are watching television while your child is supposed to be reading. To tackle the television problem, set some rules or limits with your child; decide which programs she'll watch regularly, and agree to review a television guide together each week to determine what special programming you may want to watch together.

Relate television to reading. Find videos or television programs based on books your child likes. Read the book together before viewing the program, and take time to discuss how the program compares to the book after you have seen it. Encourage your child to read books that relate to programs she likes. For example, if she likes a show about science, find books at the library or bookstore about chemistry or biology.

Turn television time into reading time. You may want to establish a daily time during which you turn off the television and everyone in the family reads for pleasure. Determine the best time, and have a wide variety of reading materials available to choose from. Read for a fixed length of time that is comfortable for everyone. Make sure you do this regularly, at least four times per week.

"There's Nothing Good to Read": Helping Your Child Find Materials

Many parents expect children to find something to read on their own. When they do intervene, it's likely to be because they are concerned about the quality of the material their children are reading. It is important to take an active role in helping your child find interesting ma-

terial to read—especially for those children who don't read much and who need lots of encouragement.

What Kind of Books Are Best?

The wider the variety of available books, the greater the chance that children will find something of interest. There are hundreds of books published each year for young teenagers; your child's teacher or librarian can help point you to some good ones. The Internet is also a good source of book ideas (see Internet Resources for Children on page 19 and Resources for Parents on page 20).

Middle school students are particularly interested in books and stories written for adolescents and young adults. You can recognize this kind of material by the following characteristics:

- Characters are well developed and are a year or two older than your child.
- Relationships are realistic.
- The story is told from the point of view of an adolescent.
- The author does not preach or talk down to readers.
- The writing follows a simple but literary style.
- Chapters are short and easy to read.

Many middle school students enjoy reading popular series such as the Goosebumps series by R.L. Stine. Although these books are not classic literature, if your child enjoys them, you should encourage him to read them. When a child becomes excited by a series of books, it means more reading as he follows the adventures of his favorite characters.

Help children get started. Becoming interested in a book often takes several chapters. If getting to the "good part" is especially difficult with certain books, try reading the first part to your child. Help your child decide when to quit and go on to another book. Not all books are going to be right for your child, and he should know that it is OK to look for other books. Some books may be too difficult

to read; unfamiliar words, complex sentences, and abstract topics can turn reading into a meaningless, unpleasant task. When your child loses interest for these reasons, help him find a more suitable selection. If the difficult book is a good one, you might read it aloud.

Books Aren't the Only Reading Materials

Many middle school students feel that true reading involves books only. Parents and teachers frequently agree, often adding that the book must be a classic. This narrow notion of reading omits a wide variety of other reading materials—comic books, magazines, newspapers, how-to manuals, pamphlets, booklets, and text-based computer games. These types of material are important sources of reading pleasure for many adults, and can be just as appealing to middle school children. They are easily read during those

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many occasions when time is short, while sitting in the doctor's office or waiting for the bus, for example.

Magazines. A wide variety of magazines is available for middle school children (see the resources list for some suggestions). You can find publications on almost any topic, from sports, to music, to nature. A subscription to a magazine is a good idea because it is exciting for middle school children to receive mail that is especially for them. If you can't afford a subscription, encourage your child to read magazines during trips to the library.

Comic books. Less enthusiastic readers should be allowed and even encouraged to read comic books. For some, reading comics and magazines is the first stage of reading for fun, and for others who already enjoy books, they remain important, additional sources of reading pleasure. A wide variety of comic books is available for children of all ages. Although superhero comics are still popular, mystery, science fiction, and autobiographical comics are among the many other options you will find.

Almost all Internet sites contain text as well as pictures, and your child will be constantly reading while he "surfs" online.

Because some comic books are violent or are aimed primarily at adults, you will want to supervise your child's selection. Find a store that has a knowledgeable staff who can make recommendations and that carries a good selection of comics for children. Visit the store with your child and consult the salespeople. You may find that you like the comic books yourself and want to read them with your child.

Computers Are Key

Your child is most likely more computer literate than you are. If he doesn't own his own computer, he probably uses one at school and has friends who own computers and have Internet access. Encourage your child to use a computer as a source of both reading and writing.

The Internet. Almost all Internet sites contain text as well as pictures, and your child will be constantly reading while he "surfs" online. There are a number of Internet magazines aimed specifically at middle school children, including some that publish children's writing. Other sites include lists of outstanding and award-winning books and access to popular authors' Web sites. Your child can use the Internet to explore his interests, be they sports, history, computers, or movies.

You can accompany your child online to find worthwhile information. If you do not know how to use the Internet and your child does, respect his expertise and ask him to show you. Look at sites together and discuss why some information on the Internet is reliable and some is not.

E-mail. Your child may not even realize that he is reading and writing when he corresponds via e-mail with friends and family. Using language skills comes very naturally in this context. You may want to start an e-mail correspondence with your child from your workplace; many children find this an easier way to discuss their feelings with their parents. You can encourage your child to correspond with his teachers and friends from school about homework. E-mail is also an excellent way for your middle school child to stay in touch with grandparents and friends who have moved away.

Where Can I Get Reading Materials for My Adolescent?

The less excited children are about reading, the more parents need to be responsible for supplying a steady stream of interesting books and magazines. This task is best accomplished through a combination of buying, borrowing, and exchanging.

Children love to own books. Go with your child to the local bookstore and offer to supply a book allowance. Another, more economical way to purchase books is at second-hand shops, flea markets, school and library book sales, and tag sales. Make sure your child has his own

bookshelf in his room, even if it is a small one (this is especially important for 10- to 14-year-old children, who have a fierce desire for independence and privacy). Buying books will show your child that you value them.

Borrowing books and other reading materials from the library is also a good idea. Your librarian will be happy to suggest a list of age-appropriate books. You should make regular trips to the library with your child, but if he does not want to go with you, be creative. Encourage him to check out books for pleasure reading even when he is at the library to do research for school assignments. On rainy Saturdays, suggest turning off the television and going to the library. Tell him you'll drive. Once he is there, he'll probably find some kind of reading material that grabs his attention.

"Maybe Reading Isn't So Bad"

A loving, encouraging, respectful attitude goes a long way toward encouraging your middle school student to read for fun. Make sure that you know what your child is reading, what she likes and does not like to read, and why—this is an important way to contribute to her reading growth. Even as she struggles to become more independent and to form her own opinions about the world around her, you can be there to support her and listen carefully.

Do not be discouraged if it seems as though your child does not value your approval. When you show your child that you value reading as a leisure-time activity, she will pick up this attitude, whether she admits it or not. Books can help to give both you and your child the vocabulary to discuss what is happening as she enters adolescence and prepares to start high school.

Resources

Books for Children Ages 10 to 14

The following is a brief list of recommended books that are appropriate for children in fifth through ninth grade. Many of the authors listed here have written other books for children, some of them about the same characters. Consult your librarian or your child's teacher for more titles.

All-of-a-Kind Family, Sydney Taylor, Yearling, 1990.

Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl, Bantam, 1993.

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret, Judy Blume, Simon & Schuster, 1990.

A Wrinkle in Time, Madeleine L'Engle, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1962.

Harriet the Spy, Louise Fitzhugh, Harper Trophy, 1990.

Island of the Blue Dolphins, Scott O'Dell, Houghton Mifflin, 1990.

Out of the Dust, Karen Hesse, Scholastic, 1997.

Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You, Barthe DeClements, Puffin, 1995.

The Adrian Mole Diaries: The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 3/4, Sue Townsend, Avon, 1997.

The Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis, HarperCollins, 1994.

The Hobbit and *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien, Ballantine, 1991.

The Phantom Tollbooth, Norton Juster, Random House, 1988.

The View From Saturday, E.L. Konigsburg, Atheneum, 1996.

Popular Book Series for Children Ages 10 to 14

California Dreams series (for ages 11 to 13), Ann Martin, Scholastic.

The Baby-Sitters Club series (for ages 8 to 12), Ann Martin, Scholastic.

Goosebumps series (ages 8 to 12), R.L. Stine, Apple.
Weetzie Bat series (ages 10 to 14), Francesca Lia Block, HarperCollins.

Magazines for Children Ages 10 to 14

Cricket Magazine (PO Box 7433, Red Oak, IA 51591-4433). This magazine includes a wide range of stories and illustrations aimed at helping young people develop an appreciation for good writing and art.

Stone Soup: The Magazine by Young Writers and Artists (Children's Art Foundation, PO Box 83, Santa Cruz, CA 95063). Intended to stir the imagination, this magazine publishes writing and art by children all over the world. Check out their Web site at http://www.stonesoup.com.

New Moon: The Magazine for Girls and Their Dreams (PO Box 3587, Duluth, MN 55803-3587). This award-winning international magazine includes stories by and

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about girls and women around the world. Aimed at celebrating girls and exploring the passage from girlhood to womanhood.

Internet Resources for Children

You will want to make sure you supervise your child as he surfs the Internet. The sites described here make a good starting point and will give you many links to explore together.

- The American Library Association site at http://www.ala.org is a good place to start. Pages include Kids Pick the Best of the Web at http://www.ala.org/kidspick/index.html, which lists links to the top 10 sites (including the Disney and the Nickelodeon Web sites) picked by a panel of children from throughout the United States. Another page is Internet Sites for Young Adults at http://www.ala.org/yalsa/yasites/index.html with links to age-appropriate sites.
- Midlink Magazine, which calls itself "the digital magazine by kids for kids in the middle grades," can be found at http://longwood.cs.ucf.edu/~MidLink and includes articles and school projects prepared by middle school students and their teachers.
- Is your child a sports fan? Check out Sports Illustrated for Kids at http://www.sikids.com for articles, games, fantasy sports (where children get to select their own draft picks and create a team to manage), and statistics. This site also includes ordering information for the print publication.
- An interesting site for middle school students and their parents is Children's Express: By Children for Everybody at http://www.ce.org, where kids can read articles written by other kids on a variety of current topics, submit articles and story ideas, and answer polls that include questions such as "For their own protection, should teachers be allowed to arm themselves in school?" This site is based in England and

the United States and aims to empower children and teens by giving them a chance to express themselves in a public forum.

Resources for Parents

Books. These books include suggestions for helping your middle school student read more, activities to get him excited about reading, and lists of age-appropriate books and magazines.

Adolescents At Risk: A Guide to Fiction and Nonfiction for Young Adults, Parents, and Professionals, Joan Kaywell, Greenwood, 1993.

Best Books for Junior High Readers, John T. Gillespie, Bowker, 1991.

Magazines for Kids and Teens, Donald Stoll, Editor, International Reading Association and the Educational Press Association of America, 1997.

More Books Appeal: Keep Young Teens in the Library, Karen C. Gomberg, McFarland, 1990.

More Teens' Favorite Books: Young Adults' Choices 1993–1995, International Reading Association, 1996.

99 Ways to Get Kids to Love Reading: and 100 Books They'll Love, Mary Leonhardt, Crown 1997.

Reading and the Middle School Student: Strategies to Enhance Literacy, Judith L. Irvin, Allyn & Bacon, 1997.

Internet sites. A wealth of information is available for parents on the Internet, including many booklists for children. You can even buy books online. Here are a few places to get started, but don't stop here; all of these sites include numerous links to sites about reading, parenting, and enjoyable activities for children:

- 700 Great Sites: Amazing, Spectacular, Mysterious Web sites for Kids and the Adults Who Care About Them at http://www.ala.org/parentspage/greatsites is a good place to begin any Web exploration. Compiled by the Children and Technology Committee of

the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, this page has links to sites on subjects ranging from art and entertainment to health and home schooling.

- The National Parenting Center at http://www.tnpc.com includes book reviews and articles about everything from helping your child learn to dealing with children's emotional problems.
- Disney has an online parenting magazine at http://www.family.com that includes articles for parents of middle school children. This searchable site gives parents the option to look for articles written for parents in the geographical area where they live.
- A great site for parents seeking advice about how to help their children learn is the Family Education Network at http://www.familyeducation.com, which includes articles and discussion groups about such topics as special education and school-parent relations.

IRA Parent Publications

Parent brochures. The International Reading Association publishes a series of brochures for parents. Single copies are free upon request by sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope to 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, Delaware 19714-8139, USA. Requests from outside the United States should include an envelope, but postage is not required. The titles in the series follow.

Get Ready to Read! Tips for Parents of Young Children

Explore the Playground of Books: Tips for Parents of Beginning Readers

Summer Reading Adventure! Tips for Parents of Young Readers

Making the Most of Television: Tips for Parents of Young Viewers

See the World on the Internet: Tips for Parents of Young Readers—and "Surfers"

Library Safari: Tips for Parents of Young Readers and Explorers

Children's, Young Adults', and Teachers' Choices. See what children and teachers across the United States have chosen to read. *Children's Choices* is an annotated, illustrated list of favorite books chosen by elementary school children. *Young Adults' Choices* is an annotated, illustrated list of favorite books chosen by junior and senior high students from across the United States. *Teachers' Choices* is an annotated, illustrated list of books for all ages identified by teachers as those most helpful and enjoyable to use in the classroom.

Single copies of the annotated *Choices* lists are available by sending a self-addressed 9"×12"envelope and US$1.00 postage and handling for each list to the International Reading Association, Department E.G., 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, Delaware 19714-8139, USA .

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